

**Critique
d'art**

Critique d'art

Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art
contemporain

14 | Automne 1999
CRITIQUE D'ART 14

Matters of resistance and acquiescence

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2411>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.2411

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 1999

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Éric Michaud, « Matters of resistance and acquiescence », *Critique d'art* [Online], 14 | Automne 1999,
Online since 28 March 2012, connection on 28 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2411> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.2411

This text was automatically generated on 28 April 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

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Gaehtgens, Thomas W. *L'Art sans frontières : les relations artistiques entre Paris et Berlin*, Paris : Librairie générale française, 1999, (Références)

Huyghe, Pierre-Damien. *Art et industrie : philosophie du Bauhaus*, Belfort : Circé, 1999

Oskar Schlemmer, Paris : Réunion des musées nationaux ; Marseille : Musées, 1999

- ¹ *L'Art sans frontières* is the misleading title bringing together several essays by Thomas W. Gaehtgens. The first part of this book, a fascinating history of the way Berlin's museums came into being, is actually completely steered by an analysis of the effects of boundaries and their formidable effectiveness. The second part, focusing on encounters made by German artists with French painting from 1848 onward, also highlights the power of boundaries on the most «border-straddling» of artists. To start with, it traces an unusual national cultural feature, whose outlines emerge from a report on resistance rather than acquiescence to the French model. «Art without bounds» should thus be taken as the author's act of faith, not as the programme of artists and art historians whose tale is retraced by this book. So the preface to the compilation remains ambiguous. On the one hand, we have to agree with Gaehtgens when he emphasizes the degree to which art history is devoid of instruments for analysing phenomena of cultural and artistic transfer--which should thus also be described by the phenomena of resistance which always go along with them. On the other hand, however, how are we to stay with him when he writes that «despite certain phases of withdrawal into a narrow-minded nationalism», art history «has always been international in its direction» (p. 12), while the following two hundred pages brilliantly give the lie to this over-optimistic assertion?

- 2 From the moment when the Altes Museum in Berlin was conceived, between 1825 and 1829, two contrasting directions in fact clashed--the historical direction of the architect Schinkel and the connoisseur Waagen, who backed a chronological exhibition of each national school, and the direction of Wilhelm von Humboldt, aimed at training and educating (*Bildung*) a broad public through the standards of the classical ideal, represented by masterpieces from every school. So the confirmation of the organic bonds that art «quite naturally» has with a populace (the example of the Boisserée brothers' collection was decisive here) contrasted right away with the confirmation of structural bonds established by art, «product of [human] imagination» and oblivious to splits between national schools. The synthesis is a tricky one.
- 3 The lengthy history of the establishment of «The Island of Museums» in Berlin would bear the mark of this early clash. The buildings housing the Neues Museum, the Nationalgalerie, the Kaiser Friedrich Museum (today's Bode Museum) and the Pergamum Museum, opened between 1855 and 1930, were, in each instance, the stuff of fierce ideological dispute. These «monuments of cultural history» were developed less for the «pleasure of art» (Humboldt) than to give the people a political education by way of art; and their expansion resulted from Prussia's claims to be the guide of the entire German nation. Under the Empire, and in particular because of the works of Wilhelm von Bode, who amassed masterpieces and placed them in isolation in an almost religious atmosphere, the island in the river Spree turned into a motif of national glory, and every bit a match for London and Paris (with Vivant Denon's Napoleon Museum acting as the prime model). The actual nature of the collections was decided upon by the «potential for identification» which they offered the nation. The role of the Pergamum Museum, outcome of the outstanding scientific works of German archaeology, was exemplary in this respect, by bolstering the Goethe-inspired idea that « the Germans were the real heirs of the Greeks ». Gaehtgens thus rightly calls these achievements of the Island of Museums «imperialist». They were the fact of a conservative cultural policy, putting together the treasures of past cultures like so many trophies, but incapable of showing any openness to contemporary art.
- 4 The second part of the book tackles the resistance put up by certain German artists to this cultural policy, as well as the resistance of their own tradition to the French models which inspired them. From Menzel to Werner and Liebermann, Meissonier's «transfers» and those associated with the Impressionists in the Germanic cultural space are examined with the rigour and attentiveness summoned by the bellicose political relations between the two countries. The essay devoted to the impact of Robert Delaunay on the German avant-garde movements, keen to read in his work, in line with their own obsessions, both the signs of a dreaded apocalypse and the signs of a hoped-for renaissance, is nevertheless more eloquent about the importance of these transfers. This ambivalence on the part of the modern artist, visible enough in his work, is the subject of the final essay in the book: as heir to both German and French cultures, Max Ernst symbolically winds up this questioning of the capacity and resistance of art, when it comes to embodying an identity, be it collective or individual.
- 5 Pierre-Damien Huyghe's essay *Art et Industrie*, with its sub-title *Philosophie du Bauhaus*, deals with another kind of resistance. Taking as the hub of his line of thinking writings and works by Bauhaus artists--whose sights were set in 1923 by Walter Gropius' formula: «Art and technology, a new unity»--, the author attempts to define the resistance shown by artistic work to the limiting powers of political power and industrial economy alike.

- 6 Influenced as much by the Heidegger of *The Question of Technology* as by the thinking of Walter Benjamin, this questioning of the fate of art in the age of the progress of heavy industry takes a new look at certain major art historical concepts. Starting from the failure of the Bauhaus to achieve its dream (reinstating the community in the work of the Gothic cathedral), Huyghe straightaway raises the issues which permeate his essay: how are we to perceive the articulation between the work's exhibition space and the commercial space of the product of industry? Does art which claims to be removed from the market immediately succumb to the grip of politics? Is an independent art space, such as the early Weimar Bauhaus strove to come up with, simply possible?
- 7 So the topic of this book is thus the utopia of an art clinging to its reserves in the face of two competing powers in the fashioning of a shared world. Retaining Rousseau's description of man caught in a basic historical *uncertainty*, and Karl Marx's description of the shift from *manufacture* to *factory*--in other words, doing away with the manual making of things by the principle of economy steering heavy industry--, Huyghe contrasts the uncertainties of the artistic experience, where making is still dependent on body and hand, and on political and industrial programming, which is always simplistic in the way it aims at swift and economical works.
- 8 The Bauhaus artists are questioned turn by turn in their capacity for resistance and in their acquiescence to these programmes of «the forces requisitioning existence», that is, in their capacity to trace an open modernity, and put off the moment of fatal identification implied by the completed realization of a programme. For « in the ideal of programming, the product is finished in advance. Its value is not due to manufacture » (p. 79). If modern art can thwart the programme, it is by its attachment to making and tactility which contrast with the polished, planned work of ideality. In cutting the line linking image and narrative, Kandinsky undid the visible factor to do with the discourse which he had hitherto accepted, and linked it more with the perceptible and its unknown element. Klee, who was alert to the uncertainties involved in the genesis of the work, held his ground in the endless openness of possibles. By this resistance of the tactile (of manufacture as experience, where the end is not given in advance), they managed to evade the old division of labour between design and realization, which controls the programmes of both industry and politics, adjusting the course of laborious peripheries across decision-making hubs. Conversely, Moholy-Nagy, by recovering the visible in the realm of optics and its devices, in which Alberti had contained them, and the classical conception of the drawing, and Mies van der Rohe, for whom material and procedure should bend to formal demands, did acquiesce to the programmed warnings of their century. This lucid and stimulating little book, which is never simplistic, is well worth lingering with, if only on account of the open-ended questioning of what we still expect from art.
- 9 The catalogue of the Oskar Schlemmer exhibition (the first one in France!) signally sheds light on this political tension between art and industry, which the Bauhaus encapsulated for a short while. The writings in this very generously illustrated catalogue--and those by Karin von Maur and Daniel Doebbels in particular--deal with the utopian spaces in which life moves about and is brought to a standstill. Through his pictures, sculptures, mural paintings and significant theatrical work, as well as through his writings, Schlemmer sought the image of a «new Greece», over and above any political and formal revolution--a «new Greece» denying neither the organic ideal of German Romanticism nor the present of mechanized technology. Between resistance and acquiescence to the political

and industrial injunctions of his day and age, Schlemmer's art bears the mark of its contradiction--which is still ours.